

AN INTRODUCTION TO ITS HISTORY,

PRINCIPLES, AND PRACTICE

HISTORIC PRESERVATION

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Design Issues

From the 1930s through the 1960s, modernist-trained architects generally ignored older buildings and their styles and tried to design in a modern mode. Respect for historical elements was not looked upon favorably, which led to the covering or defacement of many elegant nineteenth-century facades. Architectural critic Brent Broolin noted:

What Is Contextualism?

The modernist architectural code of ethics maintained that history was irrelevant, that our age was unique and therefore our architecture must be cut off from the past. Just a few short decades ago modernists argued that everyone in the world, their tastes freed by the Movement, would soon want to live in the same kind of houses, in the same kind of modern cities, all of which would reflect the spirit of our times. (While the “times” were always “ours,” the decision as to which forms characterized them was always “theirs,” the architectural elite.) Because of this overwhelming belief several generations of architects have felt little need to accommodate their work to the older, theoretically obsolete architecture around it.¹

The stylistic straitjacket of Modernism has loosened. As architects gained increased awareness of and appreciation for historic preservation, they also saw the need to design new buildings that were compatible with historic buildings. This design approach, called *contextualism*, yields contemporary architecture that is sensitive to and compatible with the context surrounding it.

Contextual design emphasizes compatibility and works to respect the scale, height, setback, materials, and detailing of surrounding older buildings. This does not mean that new designs need to look old—in most cases, this would be inappropriate. Rather, it means contemporary design should blend with the old so that new and old are distinguishable but compatible. This sense of continuity and basic sensitivity to the old has

been referred to as an “architectural genetic code,”² a code of craftsmanship worked out over generations of trial and error.

MATCHING, COMPATIBLE, OR CONTRASTING?

When designing an addition to a historic building, or even a new building in a historic district, an architect or designer should look carefully at the question of contextualism. Generally, three design approaches can be taken—matching, contrasting, and compatible.

MATCHING

In the matching approach, new architecture imitates the old and is meant to fit in as a coherent piece of the historic fabric. Additions are designed in the same style as original buildings, using similar materials and detailing, at least on the public exterior.

Critics say this approach, because it does not clearly differentiate between old and new, may fool an observer into thinking a recent construction is much older and part of the original historic structure.

CONTRASTING

Contrasting design follows the logic that the new and old should be distinct because each is a product of its own era. Often, the contrasting approach uses simple, modernist surfaces and materials to serve as a counterfoil to the elaborate detailing of historic structures. The buildings may be designed either as background structures, with little identity of their own, or may frankly compete with their historic context; in the second case, the architect considers they will one day be historic structures themselves and seen as products of their own time.

Designers who use the contrasting approach perceive that most historic districts consist of a variety of architectural styles from many periods. They see no need to stay within this design context and instead feel they enrich the district through diversity.

COMPATIBLE

Compatible design, the most common of the three approaches, suggests that new design be sensitive to historic structures and compatible with them in terms of “size, scale, color, material, and character of the property, neighborhood or environment.”³ For example, the elaborately detailed windows of a historic building can be suggested in simpler form in a new addition, or a cornice similar in height and proportion designed with a simple horizontal line rather than the more elaborate dentils found on the original.

Achieving good new design in a historic district cannot be obtained by city ordinance. It must come from architects and designers who understand the dynamics of contextualism and are sensitive to the relationship of new to old.

PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS IN CONTEXTUAL DESIGN

A TOWNHOUSE IN GREENWICH VILLAGE

A good way to understand contextual design is by example. The sketch shows two townhouses that are part of a block of similar townhouses located in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of New York City. The gap in the middle of the sketch represents a space created when, in 1971, a revolutionary group, the Weathermen, built bombs in the house on the site and accidentally detonated dynamite stored in the basement.

The empty site was purchased by new owners, who asked the architectural firm of Hardy, Holzman, Pfeiffer to design a new townhouse as infill. The architects faced the decision of how to approach the project: This was the only gap in a block-long progression of historic townhouses, all similar in design. Should they take a matching approach and restore the historic character of the block? Should they represent the contemporary new owners by designing a contrasting facade? Or should

*Greenwich Village
townhouses*





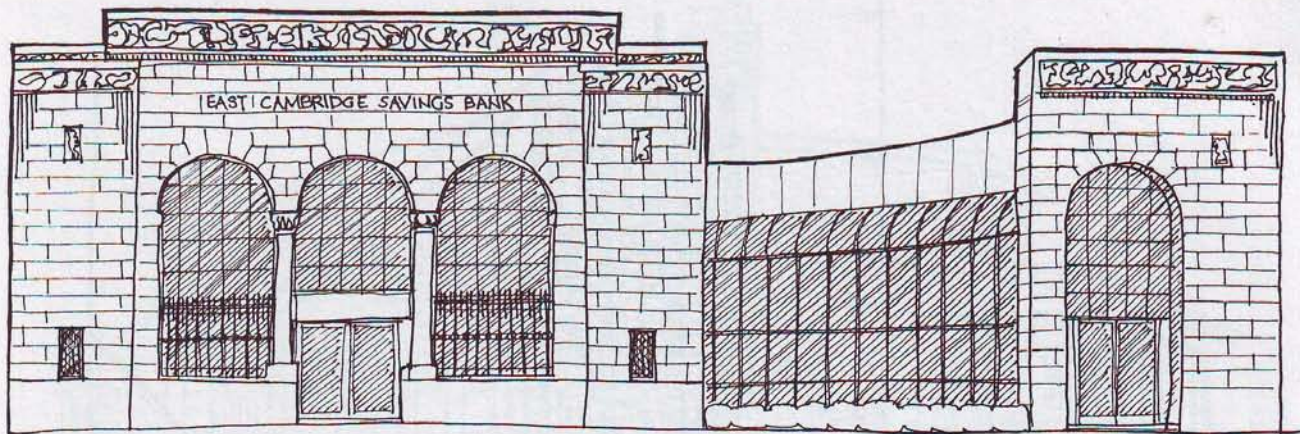
Greenwich Village infill townhouse, Hardy, Holzman, Pfeiffer, architects

they try to blend the two and develop a contemporary facade compatible with the scale and detail of the original? There is no right or wrong approach; readers can better understand the issues by considering the problem and deciding what they would do.

The architects designed an infill structure that satisfied diverse criteria. The upper (third) floor was designed to match the adjacent townhouses, with a similar brick front and identical windows. However, the windows on the lower two floors were more contemporary, with the facade turned at an angle to the street. This angle, the architects explained, expressed the historic significance of the place by symbolizing the explosion of the previous structure. This attempt to use architectural design to represent a historical event was criticized by many as being both inappropriate and incompatible with adjacent buildings, but illustrates the latitude brought to the question of contextual design.

EAST CAMBRIDGE SAVINGS BANK

An example of a contextual design that illustrates the blending of older historic building elements with new construction is the 1978 addition to the East Cambridge Savings Bank in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The architect, Thomas M. Jones, chose to tie the old with the new in an innovative way. They removed the existing wall from the right side of the building and moved it intact to the street facade. The older facade served to shield the addition, which was inserted as a curved glass



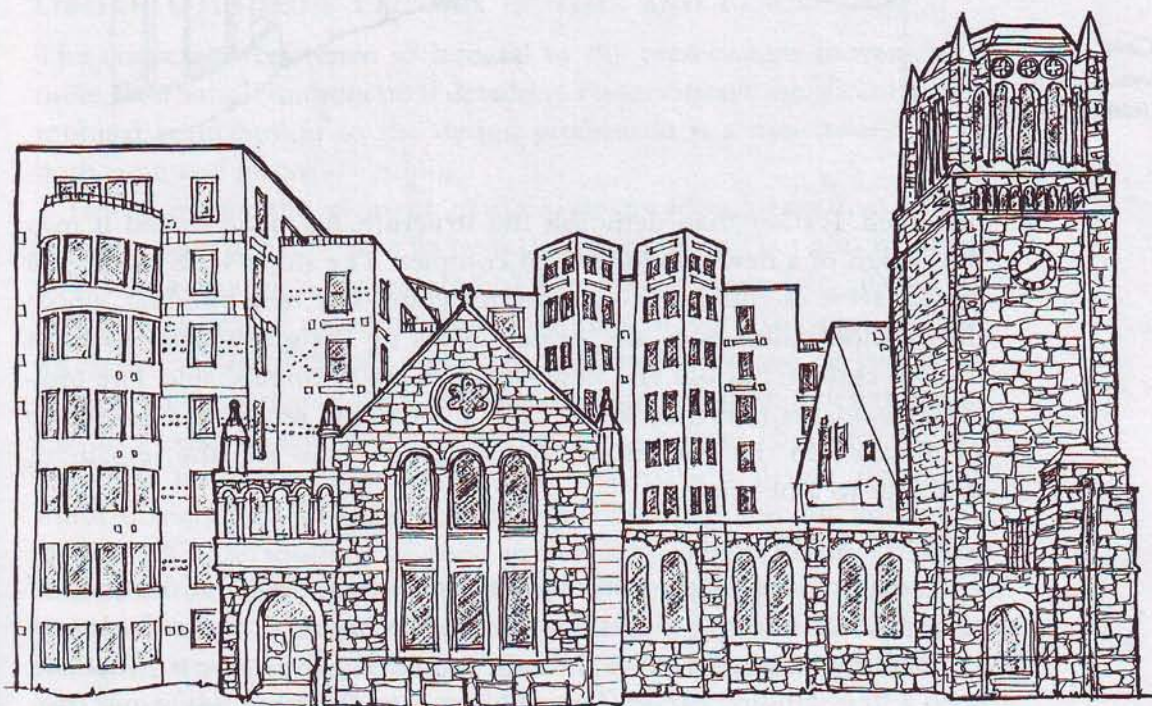
wall connecting the original building with the reconstituted facade. The design differentiates clearly between old and new but also blends and integrates them in a satisfactory contextual design solution.

East Cambridge Savings Bank, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1931, addition 1978

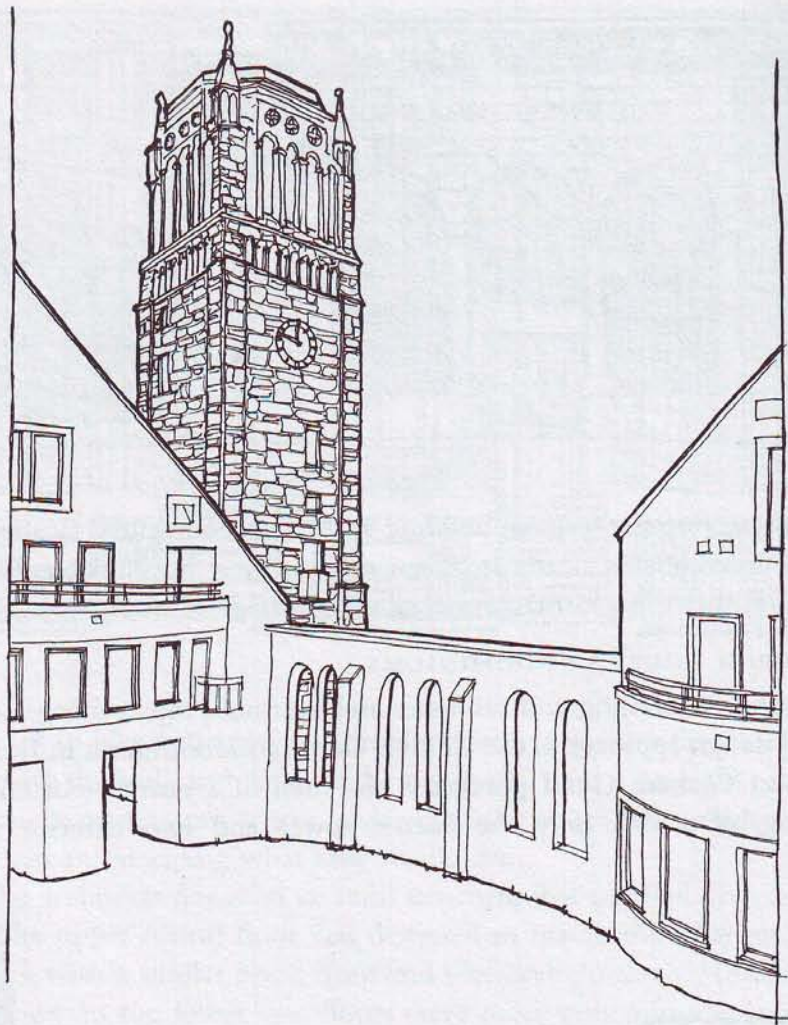
CHURCH COURT CONDOMINIUMS

Another interesting and complex architectural project using a contextual design approach is the Church Court condominiums in Boston. Architect Graham Gund purchased the shell of a burned-out church building, of which only the corner tower and two exterior walls

Church Court condominiums, Boston, exterior



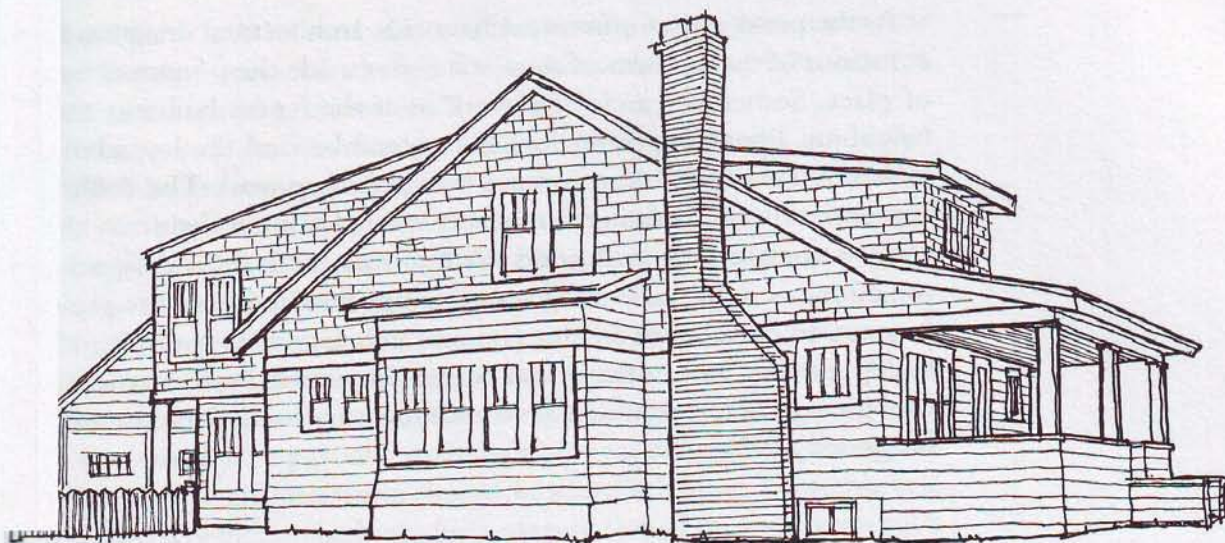
*Church Court condominiums, Boston,
interior court*



remained. Rather than demolish the structure, he incorporated it into the design of a new condominium complex. The stone walls of the old church serve as entrances to an interior court. The new building, where the condominium units are located, picks up design suggestions from the old church, but old and new elements are distinguishable. The project thus makes reference to the 1892 church and recognizes its former significance to the community but adapts the site and the remaining structure to a new use.

TYLER RESIDENCE

A small residential project illustrates contextual design at the scale of an individual house, a 1920s bungalow-style house. A master bedroom and bathroom were added to the rear, connecting the house to what had been a free-standing garage. The addition used the same siding and trim



Tyler residence: bungalow-style house, 1923, addition 1987

as the original house; new windows matched the old in appearance. The integrity of the original house was visually maintained, however, by stepping back the wall and roofline of the addition, making the addition subservient to and maintaining the visual prominence of the original structure.

DESIGN USING THE FACTORS OF TIME AND PLACE

The contextual reference so integral to the preservation movement is more than simple architectural detailing. Preservation's significant philosophical contribution to the design professions is a new awareness of both time and place.

Incorporating the element of time means recognizing that a new building does not represent its own time period only but also is part of a time continuum, as represented by Eisenman's arrow (see chapter 1). Contextual design accommodates buildings of both the past and the future. New design should recognize this continuum and be part of it.

How many contemporary architects, losing sight of this, design buildings that make no reference to what has come before? They pick the latest styles from a professional journal and make a design statement; unfortunately, that statement typically is "Forget the rest, my building is unique." A consciousness of good preservation design makes us realize that "the rest" does matter and shouldn't be forgotten. It encourages architects to see their statement as the most recent of many. They should recognize that their new building also will be old one day, and it should be able to age gracefully.